



Ben Denzer for ProPublica

Regulation

DOGE Goes Nuclear: How Trump Invited Silicon Valley Into America's Nuclear Power Regulator

by **Avi Asher-Schapiro**

March 20, 2026, 6:00 am

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Reporting Highlights

- **Fast Nuclear Buildout:** The Trump administration is rapidly rewriting rules to support the development of nuclear power plants.
- **Aligning With Industry:** Staffers from DOGE are revamping rules in ways to ease regulations and provide financial breaks for industry.
- **"No Longer Independent":** Nuclear Regulatory Commission veterans say the administration is limiting oversight in

dangerous ways.

These highlights were written by the reporters and editors who worked on this story.

Last summer, a group of officials from the Department of Energy gathered at the Idaho National Laboratory, a sprawling 890-square-mile complex in the eastern desert of Idaho where the U.S. government built its first rudimentary nuclear power plant in 1951 and continues to test cutting-edge technology.

On the agenda that day: the future of nuclear energy in the Trump era. The meeting was convened by 31-year-old lawyer Seth Cohen. Just five years out of law school, Cohen brought no significant experience in nuclear law or policy; he had just entered government through Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency team.

As Cohen led the group through a technical conversation about licensing nuclear reactor designs, he repeatedly downplayed health and safety concerns. When staff brought up the topic of radiation exposure from nuclear test sites, Cohen broke in.

"They are testing in Utah. ... I don't know, like 70 people live there," he said.

"But ... there's lots of babies," one staffer pushed back. Babies, pregnant women and other vulnerable groups are thought to be potentially more susceptible to cancers brought on by low-level radiation exposure, and they are usually afforded greater protections.

"They've been downwind before," another staffer joked.

"This is why we don't use AI transcription in meetings," another added.

ProPublica reviewed records of that meeting, providing a rare look at a dramatic shift underway in one of the most sensitive domains of public policy. The Trump administration is upending the way nuclear energy is regulated, driven by a desire to dramatically increase the amount of energy available to power artificial intelligence.

Career experts have been forced out and thousands of pages of regulations are being rewritten at a sprint. A new generation of nuclear energy companies — flush with Silicon Valley cash and boasting strong political connections — wield increasing influence over policy. Figures like Cohen are forcing a "move fast and break things" Silicon Valley ethos on one of the country's most important regulators.

The Trump administration has been particularly aggressive in its attacks on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the bipartisan independent regulator that approves commercial nuclear power plants and monitors their safety. The agency is not a household name. But it's considered the international gold standard, often influencing safety rules around the world.

The NRC has critics, especially in Silicon Valley, where the often-cautious commission is portrayed as an impediment to innovation. In an early salvo, President Donald Trump fired NRC Commissioner Christopher Hanson last June after Hanson spoke out about the importance of agency independence. It was the first time an NRC commissioner had been fired.

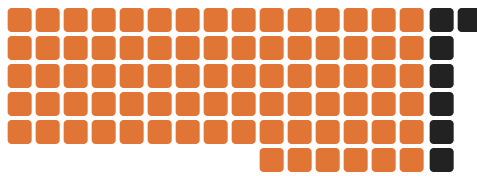
During that Idaho meeting, Cohen shot down any notion of NRC independence in the new era.

"Assume the NRC is going to do whatever we tell the NRC to do," he said, records reviewed by ProPublica show. In November, Cohen was made chief counsel for nuclear policy at the Department of Energy, where he oversees a broad nuclear portfolio.

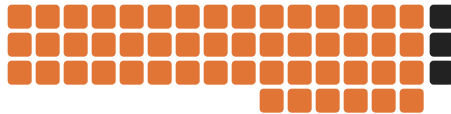
Hundreds of Staff Who Do Work Related to Nuclear Reactors and Their Safety Have Left and Not Been Replaced

443 Losses 57 Arrivals

Nuclear Reactor Regulation



Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards



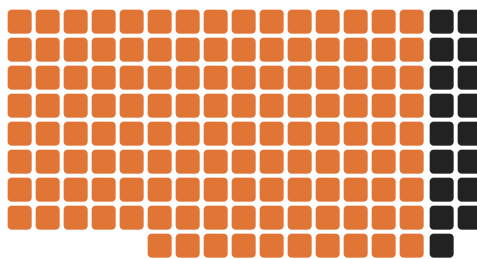
Nuclear Regulatory Research



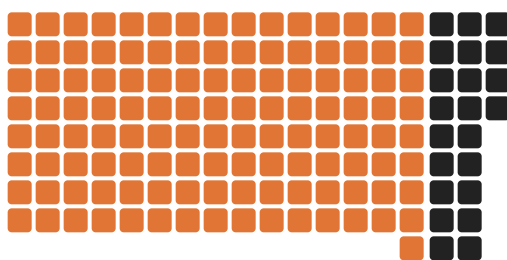
Nuclear Security and Incident Response



Regional offices



Other offices



Source: Weekly Information Reports from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Note: The data is from the week ending Jan. 24, 2025, through Feb. 13, 2026.

The aggressive moves have sent shock waves through the nuclear energy world. Many longtime promoters of the industry say they worry recklessness from the Trump administration could discredit responsible nuclear energy initiatives.

“The regulator is no longer an independent regulator — we do not know whose interests it is serving,” warned Allison Macfarlane, who served as NRC chair during the Obama administration. “The safety culture is under threat.”

A ProPublica analysis of staffing data from the NRC and the Office of Personnel Management shows a rush to the exits: Over 400 people have left the agency since Trump took office. The losses are particularly pronounced in the teams that handle reactor and nuclear materials safety and among veteran staffers with 10 or more years of

experience. Meanwhile, hiring of new staff has proceeded at a snail's pace, with nearly 60 new arrivals in the first year of the Trump administration compared with nearly 350 in the last year of the Biden administration.

Some nuclear power supporters say the administration is providing a needed level of urgency given the energy demands of AI. They also contend the sweeping changes underway aren't as dangerous or dire as some experts suggest.

"I think the NRC has been frozen in time," said Brett Rampal, the senior director of nuclear and power strategy at the investment and strategy consultancy Veriten. "It's a great time to get unfrozen and aim to work quickly."

The White House referred most of ProPublica's questions to the Department of Energy, where spokesperson Olivia Tinari said the agency is committed to helping build more safe, high-quality nuclear energy facilities.

"Thanks to President Trump's leadership, America's nuclear industry is entering a new era that will provide reliable, abundant power for generations to come," she wrote. The DOE is "committed to the highest standards of safety for American workers and communities."

Cohen did not respond to multiple requests for comment. The NRC declined to comment.

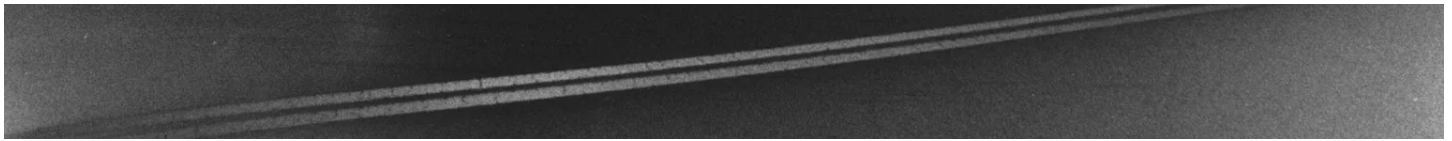
Blindsided by DOGE

The U.S. has not had a serious nuclear incident since the Three Mile Island partial meltdown in 1979, a track record many experts attribute to a rigorous regulatory environment and an intense safety culture.

Major nuclear incidents around the world have only [strengthened the resolve](#) of past regulators to stay independent from industry and from political winds. A chief cause of Japan's Fukushima accident, investigators found, was the cozy relationship between the country's industry and oversight body, which opened the door for thin safety assessments and inaccurate projections overlooking the possible impact of a major tsunami.

"We knew regulatory capture led directly to Fukushima and to Chernobyl," said Kathryn Huff, who was assistant secretary for the Office of Nuclear Energy during the Biden administration.





The U.S. has not had a serious nuclear incident since the Three Mile Island partial meltdown in 1979. Leif Skoogfors/Getty Images

The U.S. has barely built any nuclear power plants in recent decades. Only three new reactors have been completed in the last 25 years, and since 1990 the U.S. has barely added any net new nuclear electricity to its grid. Though about 20% of U.S. energy is supplied by nuclear power plants, the fleet is aging. Some experts blame the slow build-out on the challenging economics of financing a multibillion-dollar project and the uncertainty of accessing and disposing of nuclear fuels.

But an increasingly vocal group of industry voices and deregulation advocates have blamed the slow build-out on overly cautious and inefficient regulators. Among the most powerful exponents of this view are billionaires Peter Thiel and Marc Andreessen; both venture capitalists have their own investments in the nuclear energy sector and are influential Trump supporters.

Andreessen camped out at Mar-a-Lago, Trump's private club in Florida, after Trump won the 2024 election, helping pick staff for the new administration. In late 2024, Thiel personally vetted at least one candidate for the Office of Nuclear Energy, according to people familiar with the conversations. Neither responded to requests for comment.

Four months into his second term, Trump signed a series of executive orders designed to supercharge nuclear power build-out. "It's a hot industry, it's a brilliant industry," said Trump, flanked by nuclear energy CEOs in the Oval Office. He added: "And it's become very safe."

Under those orders, the NRC was directed to reduce its workforce, speed up the timeline for approving nuclear reactors and rewrite many of its safety rules. The DOE — which has a vast nuclear portfolio, including waste cleanup sites and government research labs — was tasked with creating a pathway for so-called advanced nuclear companies to test their designs.

The goal, Trump said, was to quadruple nuclear energy output and provide new power to the data centers behind the AI boom.

As DOGE [gutted agencies](#), departures mounted in the nuclear sector. Career experts in nuclear regulations and safety departed or were forced out. When Trump fired Hanson, a Democratic NRC commissioner, the president's team explained the move by saying, "All organizations are more effective when leaders are rowing in the same direction."

In an unsigned email to ProPublica, the White House press office wrote: "All commissioners are presidential appointees and can be fired just like any other appointee."

In August, the NRC's top attorney resigned and was replaced by oil and gas lawyer David Taggart, who had been [working on DOGE cuts](#) at the DOE. In all, the nuclear office at the DOE had lost about a third of its staff, according to a January 2026 count by the Federation of American Scientists, a nonprofit focused on science and technology policy.

That summer, Cohen and a team of DOGE operatives touched down at the NRC offices, a series of nondescript towers across from a Dunkin' in suburban Maryland. He was joined by Adam Blake, an investor who had recently founded an AI medical startup and has a background in real estate and solar energy, and Ankur Bansal, president of a company that created software for real estate agents. Neither would comment for this story.

Many career officials who spoke with ProPublica were blindsided: The new Trump officials at the NRC seemed to have no experience with the intricacies of nuclear energy policy or law, they said. One NRC lawyer who briefed some of the new arrivals decided to resign. "They were talking about quickly approving all these new reactors, and they didn't seem to care that much about the rules — they wanted to carry out the wishes of the White House," the official said.

At one point, Cohen began passing out hats from nuclear energy startup Valar Atomics, one of the companies vying to build a new reactor, according to sources familiar with the matter and records seen by ProPublica. NRC staffers balked; they were supposed to monitor companies like Valar for safety violations, not wear its swag.

NRC ethics officials warned Cohen that the hat handout was a likely violation of conflict rules. It betrayed a misunderstanding of the safety regulator's role, said a former official familiar with the exchange. "Imagine you live near a nuclear power plant, and you find out a supposedly independent safety regulator — the watchdog — is going around wearing the power plant's branded hats," the official said. "Would that make you feel safe?" The NRC and Cohen did not respond to requests for comment about the hat incident.

Valar counts Trump's Silicon Valley allies as angel investors. They include Palmer Luckey, a technology executive and founder of the defense contractor Anduril, and Shyam Sankar, chief technology officer of Palantir, the software company helping power Immigration and Customs Enforcement's deportation raids.

It was among three nuclear reactor companies that sued the NRC last year in an attempt to strip it of its authority to regulate its reactors and replace it with a state-level regulator. Before the Trump administration came into office, lawyers watching the case were confident the courts would quickly dismiss the suit, as the NRC's authority to regulate reactors is widely acknowledged. But new Trump appointees pushed for a compromise settlement — which is still being negotiated. The career NRC lawyer working on the case quietly left the agency.

Valar and its executives did not reply to requests for comment.

"Going So Fast"

The deregulatory push is the culmination of mounting pressure — both political and economic — to make it easier to build nuclear power in the U.S. Over the years, a bipartisan coalition supporting nuclear expansion brought together environmentalists who favor zero-carbon power and defense hawks focused on abundant domestic energy production.

Anti-nuclear activists still argue that renewable energy like wind and solar are safer and more economical. But streamlining the NRC has been a bipartisan priority as well. The latest major reform came in 2024, when President Joe Biden signed into law the ADVANCE Act, which went as far as changing the mission statement of the NRC to ensure it "does not unnecessarily limit" nuclear energy development.

Some nuclear power supporters say the Trump administration is merely accelerating these changes. They cite instances in which the current regulations appear out of sync with the times. The NRC's byzantine rules are designed for so-called large light-water reactors — massive facilities that can power entire cities — and not the increasingly in vogue smaller advanced reactor designs popular among Silicon Valley-backed firms.

Rules that require fences of certain heights might make little sense for new reactors buried in the earth; and rules that require a certain number of operators per reactor could be a bad fit for a cluster of smaller reactors with modern controls. Advances in sensors, modeling and safety technologies, they say, should be taken into account across the board.

The NRC has said it expects over two dozen new license requests from small modular and advanced reactor companies in coming years. Many of those requests are likely to come from new, Silicon Valley-based nuclear firms.

"There was a missing link in the innovation cycle, and it was very difficult to build something and test it in the U.S. because of mostly licensing and site availability constraints in the past," said Adam Stein of the pro-nuclear nonprofit Breakthrough Institute.

The regulatory changes are in flux: This spring, the NRC is starting to release thousands of pages of new rules governing everything from the safety and emergency preparedness plans reactor companies are required to submit to the procedures for objecting to a reactor license.

“It’s hard to know if they are getting rid of unnecessary processes or if it’s actually reducing public safety,” said one official working on reactor licensing, who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation from the Trump administration. “And that’s just the problem with going so fast — everything just kind of gets lost in a mush.”

Lawyers from the Executive Office of the President have been sent to the NRC to keep an eye on the new rules, a move that further raised alarms about the agency’s independence.

Nicholas Gallagher — a relatively recent New York University law school graduate and conservative writer [whom ProPublica previously identified as a DOGE operative](#) at the General Services Administration — has been involved in conversations about overhauling environmental rules.

He’s working alongside Sydney Volanski, a 30-year-old recent law school graduate who rose to national attention while she was in high school for her campaign against the Girl Scouts of America, which she accused of promoting “Marxists, socialists and advocates of same-sex lifestyle.”

NRC lawyers working on the rules were told last October that Gallagher and Volanski would be joining them, and they both appear on the regular NRC rulemaking calendar invite.

The White House maintains, however, that “zero lawyers from the Executive Office of the President have been dispatched to work on rulemaking.” Neither Gallagher nor Volanski replied to requests for comment.

The administration is routing the new rules through an office overseen by Trump’s cost-cutting guru Russell Vought, a move that was previously unheard of for an independent regulator like the NRC. The White House spokesperson noted that, under a recent executive order, this process is now required for all agencies.

Political operatives have been “inserted into the senior leadership team to the point where they could significantly influence decision-making,” said Scott Morris, who worked at the NRC for more than 32 years, most recently as the No. 2 career operations official. “I just think that would be a dangerous proposition.”

Morris voted for Trump twice and broadly supports the goals of deregulating and expanding nuclear energy, but he has begun speaking out against the administration’s interference at the NRC. He retired in May 2025 as part of a wave of retirements and firings.

At a recent hearing before the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board — an independent body that helps adjudicate nuclear licensing — NRC lawyers withdrew from the proceedings, citing “limited resources.” The judge remarked that it was the first time in over 20 years the NRC had done so.

Meanwhile, some staff members, other career officials say, are afraid to voice dissenting views for fear of being fired. “It feels like being a lobster in a slowly boiling pot,” one NRC official who has been working on the rule changes told ProPublica, describing the erosion of independence.

The official was one of three who compared their recent experience at NRC to being in a pot of slowly boiling water. “If somebody is raising something that they think that the industry or the White House would have a problem with, they think twice,” the official said.

Inside the NRC, the steering committee overseeing the changes includes Cohen, Taggart and Mike King, a career NRC official who is the newly installed executive director for operations. The former director, Mirela Gavrilas, a 21-year veteran of the agency, retired after getting boxed out of decision-making, according to a person familiar with her departure. Gavrilas did not respond to a request for comment.

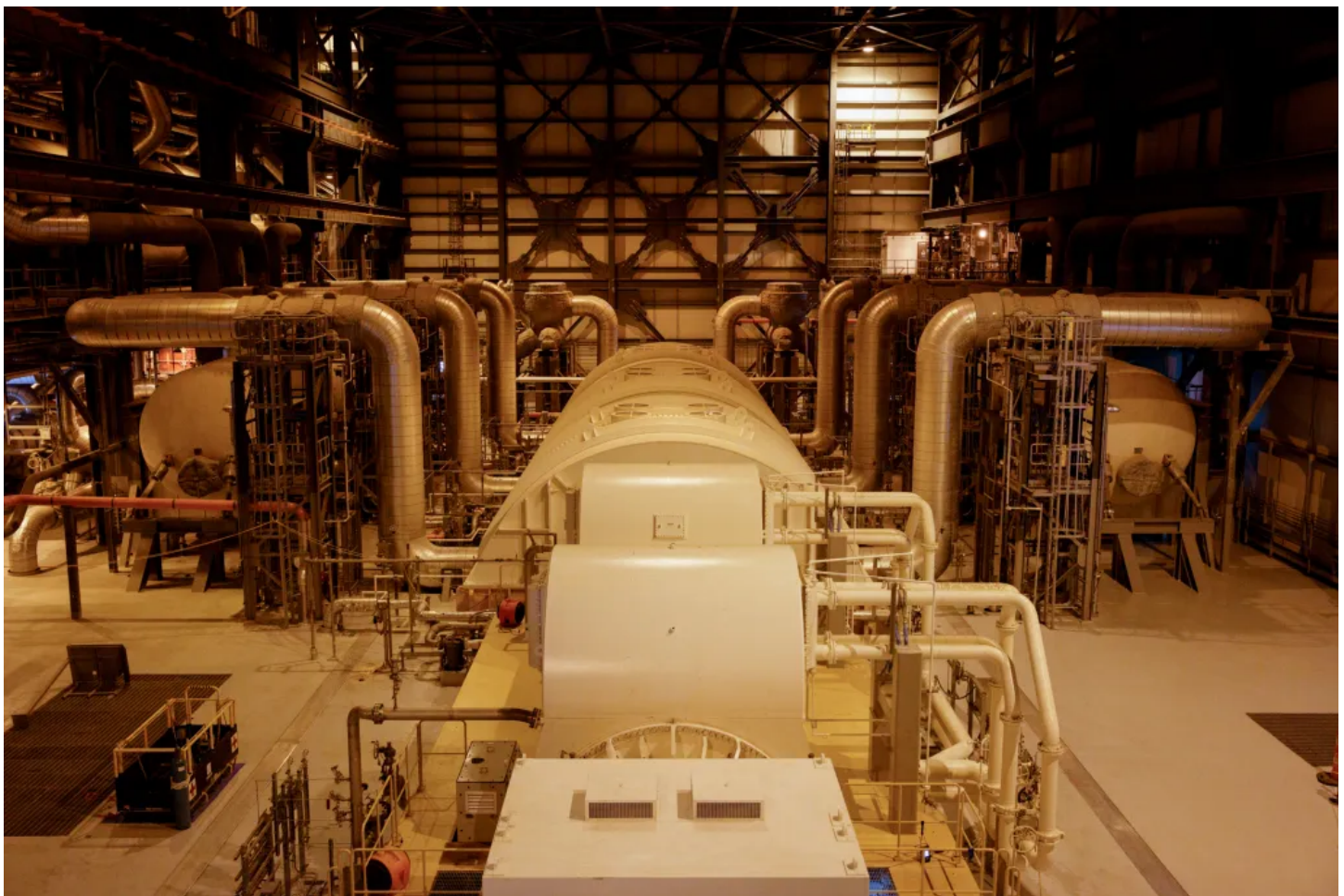
Any final changes will be approved by the NRC’s five commissioners, three of whom are Republicans. In September, the two Democratic commissioners told a Senate committee they might be fired at any time if they get crosswise with Trump — [including over revisions to safety rules](#).

Draft rules being circulated inside the NRC [propose drastic rollbacks](#) of security and safety inspections at nuclear facilities. Those include a proposed 56% cut in emergency preparedness inspection time, CNN reported in March.

Even some pro-nuclear groups are troubled by the emerging order. Some have tried to backchannel to their contacts in the Trump administration to explain the importance of an independent regulator to help maintain public support for nuclear power. Without it, they risk losing credibility.

“You have to make sure you don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater,” said Judi Greenwald, president and CEO of the Nuclear Innovation Alliance, a nonprofit that promotes nuclear energy and supports many of the regulatory changes being proposed by the Trump administration.

Greenwald’s group favors faster timelines for approving nuclear reactors, but she worries that the agency’s fundamental independence has been undermined. “We would prefer that they yield back more of NRC independence,” she said.



The Vogtle nuclear power plant in Waynesboro, Georgia, is the largest nuclear power station in the U.S. Kendrick Brinson/The New York Times/Redux

“Nuke Bros” in Silicon Valley

One Trump administration priority has been making it easier for so-called advanced reactor companies to navigate the regulatory process. These firms, mostly backed by Silicon Valley tech and venture money, are often working on designs for much smaller reactors that they hope to mass produce in factories.

“There are two nuclear industries,” said Macfarlane, the former NRC chair. “There are the actual people who use nuclear reactors to produce power and put it on the grid ... and then there are the ‘nuke bros’ in Silicon Valley.

Trump’s Silicon Valley allies have loomed large over his nuclear policy. One prospective political appointee for a top DOE nuclear job got a Christmas Eve call from Thiel, the rare Silicon Valley leader to back Trump in 2016. Thiel, whose Founders Fund invested in a nuclear fuel startup and an advanced reactor company, quizzed the would-be

official about deregulation and how to rapidly build more nuclear energy capacity, said sources familiar with the conversation.

Nuclear energy startups jockeyed to spend time at Mar-a-Lago in the months before the start of Trump's second term. Balerion Space Ventures, a venture capital firm that has invested in multiple companies, convened an investor summit there in January 2025, according to an invitation viewed by ProPublica. Balerion did not reply to a request for comment.

A few months later, when Trump was drawing up the executive orders, leaders at many of those nuclear companies were given advanced access to drafts of the text — and the opportunity to provide suggested edits, documents viewed by ProPublica show.

Those orders created a new program to test out experimental reactor designs, addressing a common complaint that companies are not given opportunities to experiment. There are [currently](#) about a dozen advanced reactor companies planning to participate. Each has a concierge team within the DOE to help navigate bureaucracy. As [NPR reported in January](#), the DOE quietly overhauled a series of safety rules that would apply to these new reactors and shared the new regulations with these companies before making them public.

Secretary of Energy Chris Wright — who [served on the board](#) of one of those companies, Oklo — [has said](#) fast nuclear build-out is a priority: “We are moving as quickly as we can to permit, build and enable the rapid construction of as much nuke capacity as possible,” he told CNBC last fall. Oklo noted that Wright stepped down from the board when he was confirmed.

The Trump administration hopes some of the companies would have their reactors “go critical” — a key first step on the way to building a functioning power plant — by July 2026. Then the NRC, which signs off on the safety designs of commercial nuclear power plants, could be expected to quickly OK these new reactors to get to market.

According to people familiar with the conversations, at least one nuclear energy startup CEO personally recruited potential members of the DOGE nuclear team, though it's not clear if Cohen was brought aboard this way. Cohen has told colleagues and industry contacts that he reports to Emily Underwood, one of Trump adviser Stephen Miller's top aides for economic policy. He is perceived inside government as a key avatar of the White House's nuclear agenda.

In its email to ProPublica, the White House said, “Seth Cohen is a Department of Energy employee and does not report to Emily Underwood or Stephen Miller in any capacity.”

The DOE spokesperson added, “Seth's role at the Department of Energy is to support the Trump administration's mission to unleash American Energy Dominance.”

Cohen has been pushing to raise the legal limit of radiation that nuclear energy companies are allowed to emit from their facilities. One nuclear industry insider, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said many firms are fixating on changing these radiation rules: Their business model requires moving nuclear reactors around the country, often near workers or the general public.

Building thick, expensive shielding walls can be prohibitively expensive, they said.

Valar CEO Isaiah Taylor has called limits on exposure to radiation a top barrier to industry growth. A recent DOE memo seen by ProPublica cites cost savings on shielding for Valar's reactor to justify changing those limits. “Shielding-related cost reductions,” the memo said, “could range from \$1-2 million per reactor.” The debate over the precise rule change is ongoing.

The DOE has been considering a fivefold increase to the limit for public exposure to radiation, which will allow some nuclear reactor companies to cut costs on these expensive safety shields, internal DOE documents seen by ProPublica show.

A presentation prepared by DOE staffers in their Idaho offices that has circulated inside the department makes the “business case” for changing the radiation dose rules: It could cut the cost of some new reactors by as much as 5%.

These more relaxed standards are likely to be adopted by the NRC and apply to reactors nationwide, documents show.

In February, Wright accompanied Valar's executive team on a first-of-its-kind flight, as a U.S. military plane was conscripted to fly the company's reactor from Los Angeles to Utah. Valar does not yet have a working nuclear reactor, and a number of industry sources told ProPublica they viewed the airlift as a PR exercise. Internal government memos justified the airlift by designating it as "critical" to the U.S. "national security interests."

Cohen posted smiling pictures of himself from the cargo bay of the military plane.

Cohen told an audience at the American Nuclear Society that the rapid build-out was essential to powering Silicon Valley's AI data centers. He framed the policy in existential terms: "I can't emphasize this strongly enough that losing the AI war is an outcome akin to the Nazis developing the bomb before the United States."

As it deliberated rule changes, the DOE has cut out its internal team of health experts who work on radiation safety at the Office of Environment, Health, Safety and Security, said sources familiar with the decision. The advice of outside experts on radiation protection has been largely cast aside.

The DOE spokesperson said its radiation standards "are aligned with Gold Standard Science ... with a focus on protecting people and the environment while avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy."

The department has already decided to abandon the long-standing radiation protection principle known as "ALARA" — the "As Low As Reasonably Achievable" standard — which directs anyone dealing with radioactive materials to minimize exposure.

It often pushes exposure well below legal thresholds. Many experts agreed that the ALARA principle was sometimes applied too strictly, but the move to entirely throw it out was opposed by many prominent radiation health experts.

Whether the agencies will actually change the legal thresholds for radiation exposure is an open question, said sources familiar with the deliberations.

Internal DOE documents arguing for changing dose rules cite a report produced at the Idaho National Laboratory, which was compiled with the help of the AI assistant Claude. "It's really strange," said Kathryn Higley, president of the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements, a congressionally chartered group studying radiation safety. "They fundamentally mistake the science."

John Wagner, the head of the Idaho National Laboratory and the report's lead author, acknowledged to ProPublica that the science over changing radiation exposure rules is hotly contested. "We recognize that respected experts interpret aspects of this literature differently," he wrote. His analysis was not meant to be the final word, he said, but was "intended to inform debate."

The impact of radiation levels at very low doses is hard to measure, so the U.S. has historically struck a cautious note. Raising dose limits could put the U.S. out of step with international standards.

For his part, Cohen has told the nuclear industry that he sees his job as making sure the government "is no longer a barrier" to them.

In June, he shot down the notion of companies putting money into a fund for workplace accidents. "Put yourself in the shoes of one of these startups," he said. "They're raising hundreds of millions of dollars to do this. And then they would have to go to their VCs and their board and say, listen, guys, we actually need a few hundred million dollars more to put into a trust fund?"

He also suggested that regulators should not fret about preparing for so-called 100-year events — disasters that have roughly a 1% chance of taking place but can be catastrophic for nuclear facilities.

"When SpaceX started building rockets, they sort of expected the first ones to blow up," he said.

[Pratheek Rebala](#) and [Kirsten Berg](#) contributed research.

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